Synopsis

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Journey Towards Liberation and Empowerment in the Select Novels of Flora Nwapa

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Literature is a conglomeration of works connected by language, subject matter, place, and origin. It includes oral, written, dramatic, and broadcasting compositions that have been preserved for ages. With the progression of time, literature grows with new ideas, new developments and with different personalities, portraying the country‟s culture, place, and time.

In the history of world literature, African literature has its own significance. It is from Africa and has its own rich traditions and customs. It is a blend of people and languages from various cultures. African writings have gained popularity because of its connection with Eastern and Western countries.

Nigerian literature is an offshoot of African literature. It becomes necessary to know about its growth and development. The root of Nigerian literature is found in African literature which was initiated by the warriors, storytellers, priests, and soldiers who passed on stories and proverbs through the folklores. The written tradition emerged in Northern Nigeria with the advent of Arab scholars and traders. Ruth Finnegan‟s book *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) talks about the beginning of Nigerian literature in the form of storytelling. Bade Ajuwon, in the article, "Oral and Written Literature in Nigeria" states:

> Pre-literate Nigeria once enjoyed a verbal art civilization which, at its high point, was warmly patronised by traditional rulers and the general public. At a period when writing was unknown, the oral medium served the people as a bank for the preservation of their ancient experiences and beliefs. Much of the evidence that related to the past of Nigeria, therefore, could be found in oral traditions. (306)

The Biafran war paved way for the emergence of Nigerian writers. Through many notable male and female writers, the Nigerian civilization is made known universally. They

were developing high artistic values in their literary works. Some of the notable male writers include Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, Gabriel Okara, Teju Cole, and Femi Osofisan and the female writers who contributed their share to the literary development are Flora Nwapa, Zulu Sofola, Sefi Atta, Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Zaynab Alabi. These writers with various achievements of rare quality, make Nigeria proud on the global scene.

Among these writers, Flora Nwapa is an illustrious twentieth-century woman writer of post-colonial Nigeria. Born in Oguta, she admired reading Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and William Thackeray. Nwapa‟s childhood which was a mixture of happiness and tribulations molded her into a strong woman. She took great interest in helping her mother and was fascinated with the stories of Igbo tradition, goddesses, and mythology told by the local women. Nwapa‟s new literary tenet about Nigeria was read throughout the world with the founding of Tana Press. As the founder of Tana Press, she aimed to voice women‟s liberty. Umeh Marie in her article inputs Nwapa as, “a complex figure and a private dignified individual” (121).

Nwapa‟s contribution to Nigerian literature in three decades was six novels, three plays, two collections of short stories, a book of poems, and nine children‟s books. Her fictions portray women as strong and independent prototype, giving a buoyant perspective to African women. By giving importance to women, Nwapa did not degrade men. She gave men a specific role and position; not like the dominant men portrayed by writers of Nwapa‟s period, but as supportive of women in all possible ways. As a leading twentieth-century African writer Nwapa transforms the male-dominated environment, which is a feat achieved in a patriarchal society. Among the six novels written by the author, five novels, namely *Efuru* (1966), *Idu* (1970), *Never Again* (1975), *One is Enough* (1981) and *Women are Different* (1986) are chosen for the study.

Thesis Statement:

The patriarchal stereotypes of men and the perspectives of men about women are changing, with the change in the social and cultural scenario. The present study analyses such changes as reflected in the characters of Flora Nwapa‟s fiction.

Objectives:

- To examine the change in the patriarchal stereotypes of men and women
- To analyse how Flora Nwapa‟s men help in the liberation of women
- To study the empowerment of female characters
- To understand the role of socio-cultural changes in shaping the lives of people

Methodology:

Collective Consciousness by Emily Durkheim is applied in the analysis of characters in the fourth chapter and MLA 8th edition is used for documentation purposes.

The present study is divided into five chapters. Chapter one, “Introduction” gives an overview of Nigerian literature and Flora Nwapa’s contribution to literature. It also includes the methodology and review of the literature. Chapter two, “Man: Free from Patriarchal Mindset” examines Nwapa‟s men who are different from the stereotypes and support women. Chapter three, “Woman: A Powerful Entity” is a critical analysis of the novels which describe women as strong independent characters unlike the stereotypes, Chapter four, “Synthesis between Tradition and Modernity” with the help of Emile Durkheim‟s Collective Consciousness, analyses the synthesis between tradition and modernity as the individuals imbibe modern values and the fifth chapter, “Conclusion” consolidates the findings of the present research and provides scope for further study.

Chapter 2 - Man: Free from Patriarchal Mindset

Nigerian society is a patriarchal society. It is a major feature in the traditional Nigerian community. Generally, men do not participate in domestic work. They have their

own qualities like strength, courage, and self-confidence which they think women do not possess. Nwapa‟s portrayal of men is quite different from other writers in that they are not very dominant. Women are no longer slaves or subordinates but are of value to the men. Her men respected women in every walk of their life. They often look up to women to fulfill their dreams. The men treat women with concern, love and affection and as whole beings. They always make the work easy for women, especially in their education and trade and thus prove to be different when compared to the men in the works of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka.

Nwashike Ogene, Efuru‟s father in the novel *Efuru* goes distressed, when Efuru elopes with Adizua. He sends his relatives and community men to bring back Efuru. The men whom he sends tell Efuru, “You seem to be happy here and we wonder why your father wants us to bring you back. We shall tell him what we have seen” (9). Hearing that Efuru is happy with Adizua, Ogene remains silent and wishes good for Efuru and her husband‟s family. Knowing that Efuru‟s happiness lies with Adizua and his family, Ogene drops the idea of getting Efuru back home. By remaining silent, Ogene paves way for Efuru to lead a peaceful life.

In the novel *Idu,* when Ojiujo leaves Amarajeme, he cries for many days. He does not have his food and goes around the village wearing black dress. Though he is deserted by his wife, he hopes that she will be back. He says to Idu, “You have seen what your friend did to me. But don‟t worry, don‟t sympathize with me, she will come back. I know she will come back. What Ojiugo, my wife, did is childish. She will come back to me. Mark my words. The devil tempted her” (107). He again praises Ojiujo telling, “She is not a cruel woman. So she will come back. That‟s why I cook for her every day. She will return. Obukodi is a man like myself. Obukodi has eight wives, Ojiugo will be his ninth. Why did he take the only one that I have? (110). These instances from the novel shows that Nwapa has brought men and

women together through the bond of love. Their bond is so strong that one cannot live without the other. The men give way to their women without standing in their way.

Further, Nwapa‟s men are different in their attitude towards polygamy. They cherish their wife and love them the most. Adiewere and Idu in the novel *Idu,* remain childless for four years. “It had worried her husband in the first year, but he was in love with his wife and he did not want to marry another wife. Many people had advised him to marry another, but he had refused. He was not at heart a polygamist” (16). Nwapa‟s men are the strength of women.

Men in Nwapa‟s novel are patient. One such case is Egemba who waits patiently for Agnes‟ examination results. He does not force Agnes to do things in a hurry and finish her degree. The author says, “she insisted on getting a piece of paper before getting married, and her husband, that long suffering man had to wait all those years” (52). Egemba‟s love for Agnes is so intense that he treats her with care and compassion. No man will wait so many years to marry a girl. But Egemba is different in his character. Egemba is generous and he loves helping people. Egemba‟s special interest in Agnes makes him take care of her education and he values her more than anything in the world. Nwapa portrays Egemba as a decent and mature husband.

Chapter 3 – Woman: A Powerful Entity

Literature as a domain reveals concern for women‟s empowerment. It portrays women‟s crucial role in society. In the early decades, Nigerian women were portrayed as voiceless, invisible undergoing a variety of subjugations, because of the patriarchal way of

life. Women writers were not given due recognition. Later, the emergence of women‟s fiction reflected the changing scenario, and empowerment, self-assertion, and identity became the focus of the writings. Nwapa‟s women are assertive, determined, and self-reliant.

The twentieth century finds a change in the role and position of women. Women wanted to make their mark as far as their social, economic, and cultural identities are concerned. Apart from being wives and mothers, they expressed their desire to participate in politics and public activities which would lead them to their independence. During the times when women were considered appendages in Nigeria, Nwapa portrayed her women as subjects and not mere objects. She articulated through her writing that women can establish their identity through values and liberation. Nwapa‟s desire was to place women at the center of the universe and not in the margins. Her female characters, who were transformed by education and trade, played a major role in the development of societies.

Efuru, the central character of the novel *Efuru* is a remarkable woman from a distinguished family. She is one of Nwapa‟s female characters, who is quite independent. When Adizua asks Efuru if she will come with him to work in the farm, she says, “I am going to trade” (10). Efuru is hopeful that her trade can help to survive and come up in life. She has her plans and executes them with her husband Adizua. Efuru‟s suggestion is taken well by her husband because he knows that Efuru is doing everything for the welfare of his family. Being an extraordinary woman, Efuru accepts things as they come to her. She is so bold, that she visualises her life without Adizua. Though she has felt bad about Adizua‟s disappearance in the beginning, she starts accepting the reality and does not pine thinking of Adizua. She has done her duty to him as Adizua‟s wife and has fulfilled her responsibility toward Adizua‟s mother as her daughter-in-law. Efuru, who does not think in the traditional way, wants to be different from the others; she loves to explore things.

Amaka, introduced in the novel *One is Enough*, as a childless woman, is constantly criticized by her mother-in-law for being barren. Amaka is a sensible and pragmatic woman; all the same, she yearns for children. Following the Nigerian tradition, she considers marriage and children as important parts in a woman‟s life. Before her marriage, she envies other women who are married. Even though many marriage proposals have come to her, nothing materialized. Amaka enters the trade. She decides to do so to make herself busy in trade to escape her mother-in-law‟s criticisms. As a contractor, Amaka becomes successful. She (re)discovers her new self who can lead her life according to her wishes. The author says:

> Amaka went on with her business in Onitsha, supplying timber, sand and food. She was a contractor, one of the numerous female contractors who had sprung up during and end of the war. Before the war, she had been a teacher. At the end of the war, because she took part in the „attack trade‟, she rediscovered herself. She was amazed at what she was able to do and to accomplish. (4)

When Agnes in the novel *Women are Different*, succeeds in one level of learning, she does not stop with that. She aspires to go to the next level. She continues with the next level of learning. Ayo Dele suggests that she could do the next level by entering a university for which she has to go to Ibadan. She feels that taking care of her children would be a difficult task if she goes to the university. However, she makes up her mind to apply to the University of Ibadan. By portraying Agnes as an independent and bold woman with progressive thinking, Nwapa drives home the point that education would give women the stability they require in marriage and at home. Dr Mujahid in the article, “Gender Inequality and Empowerment of Women through Education” quotes the perception of education as:

> Education increases the economic, social and political opportunities available to women. It improves women‟s lifestyle and management capacity. Educated women improve their decision-making power and create opportunities and choices to improve

> their family members lives. Through education women can reduce the impact of oppressive norms, values, customs and traditions that have neglected the needs of girls and women. Besides providing knowledge, skills and income earning opportunities, education of women can reduce child and maternal mortality and fertility, improves family health and increase children‟s education particularly of girls. This in turn improves the status of women in the society. (78)

Every single success becomes possible for Agnes through education and hard work.

Nwapa‟s Idu in the novel *Idu,* is known for her customs and beliefs in the traditional Igbo society. The relationship that Idu has with Adiwere is said to be a monogamous relationship. Unlike Efuru and other female characters of Nwapa, Idu is attached to traditions and customs. People of her community say that no one has heard them quarreling. They comment on how marriage has changed Adiwere‟s life. Idu develops the pressure between the tradition and modern society.

Idu‟s uniqueness is brought out when she refuses to weep for Adiwere. Idu‟s relationship with Adiwere was a loving one. Her desire was to live with her husband in sunshine and rain. After Adiwere dies, she does not want to live. When Idu hears of Adiwere‟s death, she says, “„I am going with my husband. Both of us will go there, to the land of the dead. So, Adiwere, my husband, wait for me after you have crossed the stream. I am coming to meet you there, and we shall continue our lives there. It will even be better there‟” (211). She refuses to scrape her hair and wear black for mourning.

Nwapa explores the challenges faced by women and restructures her women to voice her own artistic concerns. Her critique is deeply personal and highly universal. Through Nwapa, it becomes evident that colonialism has made women think about new ideas about marriage, education, and culture. She clearly demonstrates the post-colonial setting of

transformation in African women‟s society and gives a new exuberance that her women are self-styled. In her novels, women are encouraged to strive to be self-reliant and independent.

Chapter 4 – Synthesis between Tradition and Modernity

Nwapa‟s novels have brought a synthesis between tradition and modernity. Women in Nigerian society hold traditional practices like motherhood, wifehood, and holding traditional practices. On the other hand, men in the traditional and modern world are helpful in framing the synthesis between tradition and modernity. Efuru in the novel *Efuru* is a well-deserving housewife. She loves her husband. She cooked him delicious food. “Efuru went to the kitchen to cook. She used plenty of fish and cooked delicious nsala soup for her dear husband. When her husband came back from the stream, she welcomed him and put the food before him” (10). Preparing delicious food always makes a Nigerian woman gain special attention from her husband and Efuru was admired by Adizua for the same.

Motherhood is another important tradition. Without children, the family is not complete. Efuru says “I am still young, surely God cannot deny me the joy of motherhood” (24). In the novel *Idu*, Idu is without a child for four years. She worries but her husband‟s consolation and her faith bring a boy baby to the family. The same in the novel *Women are Different*, though Agnes is not well attached to Egemba. She has five children. In *Never Again*, Kate has children and in *One is Enough*, Amaka longs for a child. When everyone in her husband‟s family neglects her for being barren, she goes to Lagos and through her relationship with Father Mclaid, gives birth to twins. Thus, every Nigerian community whether traditional or modern gives importance to motherhood. As Emily Durkheim in his theory Collective Consciousness says, it is a set of shared beliefs, ideas, and moral attitudes which operates as a unifying force within the society. Beliefs in deities are one of the important parts in the Nigerian community. People in Oguta community have a great belief in worshiping the lake goddess, Uhamiri. Yam and cassava are the staple crops. Every ritual is incomplete without these crops. Women in the Nigeria community break kola-nuts. In cities,

still people follow these traditions. Rearing of children is done by men also. When it is found to be the major part in traditional Nigeria, Nwapa‟s modern men and women spend time in rearing children and teaching them traditional values. Thus, Nwapa through her fiction portrays how the synthesis between tradition and modernity is beautifully maintained in the Nigerian community.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

What Ada Uzoamaka Azoda in the article "*Efuru* and *Idu*: Rejecting Women‟s Subjugation" in the book, *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essay* says about Nwapa is worthy of notice in this context. "Nwapa became the voice of thousands of voiceless women who were, in the real sense of the word, non-existent, and invisible in the new Nigeria..... For the first time in stories, in contrast to Nigerian literary history, Nwapa posits a set of gynocentric stories, in contrast to writings by male novelists of the day" (163).

As Nwapa‟s novels evolve, her female characters become increasingly independent, assertive, and self-styled: they become women with a mission to realize themselves. Men treat women with respect by turning a new leaf in treating their wives humanely. Thus, Nwapa through men frames a changing cultural environment that paves way for women‟s empowerment.

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